

Tianyinzi: The Master of Heavenly Seclusion

(天隱子)

Translated by Livia Kohn

Note: This is the first English translation of the text of “The Master of Heavenly Seclusion” (Chinese: 天隱子 / *Tiān yǐn zi*), a short Taoist (Daoist) scripture that is often included in a larger work known as *Xuanzhenzi* (玄真子). It was first published in Livia Kohn’s *The Taoist Experience: An Anthology* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993).

Translator’s Note

Outlining the Taoist path in five distinct stages and associating each with a particular form of liberation, the *Tianyinzi* integrates the different longevity techniques and forms of meditation current in the mid-Tang period. The text is associated with Sima Chengzhen, famous patriarch of Highest Clarity [*Shangqing*] and leading Taoist of his day, but its ultimate authorship remains unclear. Nobody quite knows who this elusive Master of Heavenly Seclusion was. Still, his synthesis and comprehensive discussion have continued to inspire Taoists till today.

Introduction by Sima Chengzhen

The path of spirit immortality begins with long life. The starting point for long life is the nourishment of energy. Human beings receive energy from heaven and earth, then yin and yang harmonize it. Yin and yang spiritual and empty – this is the mind. Spirit and material souls – they govern the mind day and night, during waking and sleeping. They make sure the human body is never far from the path of immortality.

I do not know where the Master of Heavenly Seclusion came from. He wrote this treatise in eight sections to encompass the secret and the wondrous. Things found here cannot be attained through study alone.

There are the various techniques to cultivate and refine body and energy, to nourish and harmonize mind and emptiness. Its basic concept of “return to the root” goes back to Laozi; the idea of “emitting a radiance” is found with *Zhuangzi*. Long life and eternal vision are indeed in this text.

I have practiced the techniques of the Tao myself. Now I feel compassion for the people of the world. They often die untimely and do not live out their natural life-spans. Therefore, I decided to transmit the teaching to fellow adepts of long life. I have simplified it so that it can be practiced and referred to easily. Ever since the time of Laozi, there has only been this teaching of the Master of Heavenly Seclusion.

TIANYINZI

1. Spirit Immortality

All people from birth are endowed with the energy of emptiness. Originally their essence and enlightenment are of penetrating awareness, learning has no obstructions, and the “spirit” is pure. Settle this spirit within and let it shine without! You will naturally become different from ordinary people. You will be a spirit immortal! Yet even as a spirit immortal, you are still human.

To accomplish spirit immortality you must cultivate the energy of emptiness. Never let the common world defile it. Find spirit immortality in spontaneously following your nature. Never let false views obstruct your path.

Joy, anger, sadness, happiness, love, hate, and desires are the seven perversions of the emotions. Wind, damp, cold, heat, hunger, satiation, labor, and idleness are the eight perversions of energy.

Rid yourself of them! Establish immortality!

2. Simplicity

The *Book of Changes* says: “The way of heaven and earth is simple.” What does this mean?

The Master of Heavenly Seclusion says: “Heaven and earth are above my head and beneath my feet. When I open my eyes I can see them. I can speak of them without complex devices. Thus I say: Consummate simplicity is the virtue of immortality.”

What path should be used to seek this? He says: “Without seeking you cannot know; without a path you cannot attain the goal. All students of spirit immortality must first realize simplicity. Teachings that are marvelous, artful, and attractive only lead people astray.

They do not lead to the root. They could never be my teaching.”

3. Gradual Progress Toward the Gate of the Tao

In the *Book of Changes*, there is the hexagram called “Progressive Advance.” Laozi speaks of the “Marvelous Gate.” Human beings should cultivate inner perfection and realize their original natures. They should not expect sudden enlightenment. Rather, they progress gradually and practice the techniques in peace. The following five are the progressive gateways to the Tao.

The first is fasting and abstention.

The second is seclusion.

The third is visualization and imagination.

The fourth is sitting in oblivion.

The fifth is spirit liberation.

What does fasting and abstention mean? It means cleansing the body and emptying the mind.

What does seclusion mean? It means withdrawing deep into the meditation chamber.

What does visualization and imagination mean? It means taming the mind and recovering original nature.

What does sitting in oblivion mean? It means letting go of the personal body and completely forgetting oneself.

What does spirit liberation mean? It means spirit pervasion of all existence.

Practice according to these five and perfect step one, then only proceed to step two. Perfect step two, then gradually move on to step three. Perfect step three, then approach step four. Perfect step four, then finally pass on to step five. Thus you attain spirit immortality!

4. Fasting and Abstention (齋戒 / Zhāijiè)

Fasting and abstention not only mean to live on vegetables and mushrooms. Cleansing the body is not just bathing to remove the dirt. Rather, the method is to regulate the food so that it is perfectly balanced, to massage the body so that it glows in health.

All people are endowed with the energy of the five agents.

They live on things that consist of the five agents. From the time they enter the womb people breathe in and out; blood and essence circulate in their bodies. How could one stop eating and yet attain long life?

Ordinary people do not realize that to abstain from food and nourish on pure energy are only temporary measures of the Taoists. These things do not mean that we completely abstain from all grain. We speak of fasting and abstention from food, yes. But we refer to the purification of nourishment and the moderation of intake. If one is hungry one eats – but never to satiation. Thus we establish a balanced diet.

Don't eat anything not well cooked! Don't eat strongly flavored dishes! Don't eat anything rotten or conserved! These are our basic abstentions. Massage your skin with your hands so that it becomes moist and hot! This drives out the cold energy and makes the body radiate with a glow.

Refrain from long sitting, long standing, long exhaustive labor!

All these are basic abstentions. They serve to balance and regulate the body. If the body is strong, energy is whole. Thus, fasting and abstention are the first gateway to the Tao.

5. Seclusion (安处 / *Ānchù*)

What is meant by seclusion? It has nothing to do with living in ornate halls, in cavernous buildings, on double matting and thick carpeting. It means sitting with one's face to the south, sleeping with one's head to the east, complying in everything with the harmonious rhythm of yin and yang.

Light and darkness should be in balance. The room should not be too high. If it is too high, yang is predominant and there will be too much light. The room should not be too low. If it is too low, yin is predominant and there will be too much darkness. The reason for this precaution is that, when there is too much light, the material souls will be harmed. When there is too much darkness, the spirit souls will suffer. People's three spirit souls are yang, their seven material souls are yin. Harm them with light and darkness, and they will get sick.

When things are arranged in the proper balanced way, we have a chamber of seclusion. Still, don't forget how various the energies of heaven and earth can be. There may be, for example, a violent yang that attacks the flesh. Or there may be a lascivious yin that overpowers the body. Be wary and guard against these!

During the progressive advance of cultivation and nourishment there is no proper seclusion unless these instructions are carried out. Thus the Master of Heavenly Seclusion says:

"The room I live in has windows on all four sides. When wind arises I close them; as soon as the wind has died down I open them again. In front of my meditation seat a curtain is suspended; behind it a screen has been placed. When it is too light I draw the curtain to adjust the brightness inside. When it gets too dark I roll the curtain up again to let light in from outside.

"On the inside I calm my mind, on the outside I calm my eyes.

Mind and eyes must be both completely at peace. If either light or darkness prevails, there are too many thoughts, too many desires.

How could I ever calm myself inside and out?" Thus, in studying the Tao, seclusion marks the second step.

6. Visualization and Imagination (存想 / *Cúnxiǎng*)

Visualization is to produce a vision of one's spirit. Imagination means to create an image of one's body. How to do this? Close your eyes and you can see your own eyes. Collect the mind and you can realize your own mind. Mind and eyes should never be separate from the body; they must not harm the spirit: this is what visualization and imagination are for.

Ordinary people, to the end of their days, direct their eyes only toward others. Thus their minds wander outside. When the mind is concerned only with outer affairs, it also causes the eyes to

continue looking at things outside. Brightly sparkling, their light floats around and never reflects back on themselves. How can people not become sick from this and end up dying prematurely?

Therefore, “return to the root means tranquility, and tranquility means to recover life.” To recover life and perfect one’s inner nature is called “the gate of all subtleties.” Thus, with the step of visualization and imagination the task of learning the Tao is half completed.

7. Sitting in Oblivion (坐忘 / Zuòwàng)

Sitting in oblivion is the perfection of visualization and imagination. It is also the utter oblivion of visualization and imagination.

To put the Tao into action but not oneself act – isn’t that the meaning of sitting? To see something and not act on it – isn’t that the meaning of oblivion?

Why do we speak of not acting? Because the mind remains free from agitation. Why do we speak of not seeing? Because the body is completely obliterated.

Someone asks: “If the mind is unmoving, does it have the Tao then?” The Master of Heavenly Seclusion remains silent and does not answer.

Another asks: “If the body is obliterated, does it have the Tao then?” The Master of Heavenly Seclusion closes his eyes and does not look.

Then someone awakens to the Tao and, in withdrawing, says:

“The Tao is really in me. What person is this ‘me’? What person actually is this Master of Heavenly Seclusion?”

Thus, self and other are both forgotten. Nothing is left to shine forth.

8. Spirit Liberation (神解 / Shénjiě)

Step one, fasting and abstention, is called liberation through faith. Without faith, the mind cannot be liberated.

Step two, seclusion, is called liberation through tranquility.

Without tranquility, the mind cannot be liberated.

Step three, visualization and imagination, is called liberation through insight. Without insight, the mind cannot be liberated.

Step four, sitting in oblivion, is called liberation through absorption. Without absorption, the mind cannot be liberated.

When the four gates of faith, tranquility, insight, and absorption have been pervaded by the spirit, then we speak of spirit liberation. By “spirit” we mean that which arrives without moving and is swift without hurrying. It pervades the rhythm of yin and yang and is as old as heaven and earth.

When the three forces, heaven, earth, and humanity, are combined, changes occur. When the myriad beings are equalized, then the Tao and the Virtue are active. When the one original nature of all is realized, there is pure suchness. Enter into suchness and return to non-action.

The Master of Heavenly Seclusion says: “I am born with the changes; I will die with the changes. In accordance with the myriad beings I move; going along with the myriad beings I rest. Pervasion comes from the one original nature; perfection comes from the one original nature. Through spirit I am liberated from all: life and death, movement and rest, pervasion and perfection.”

Among human beings the liberated are spirit immortals: in heaven they are heavenly immortals; on earth they are earth immortals; in water they are water immortals. Only when they pervade all are they spirit immortals.

The path to spirit immortality consists of these five progressive gateways. They all lead to one goal only.